

# Estelle Brodman: educator extraordinaire

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**Objective:** The purpose of this article is to describe the educational contributions of Estelle Brodman PhD, to medical librarianship.

**Methods:** The article is based on a comprehensive search of Dr. Brodman's articles, a review of her two Medical Library Association oral history interviews, and personal recollections.

**Findings:** This article documents the educational contributions of Dr. Brodman, a librarian, researcher, and educator who had a significant and lasting impact on the education of medical librarians through more than fifty years of concentrated effort.

## INTRODUCTION

Education was *the* major cornerstone in the life of Estelle Brodman, PhD. Her life was compelled and directed by education, both her own growth as well as her drive to better understand education in order to teach others.

The purpose of this article is to inform the reader about Dr. Brodman's personal education as well as her educational contributions to medical librarianship. There are multiple ways to introduce a new generation of medical librarians to the greatness of Dr. Brodman: this paper will employ her own words, gathered from her writings and interviews, to convey her commitment, intellect, and spirit.

## PERSONAL EDUCATION

Dr. Brodman's family instilled and encouraged education. She adopted their educational drive, and this led her to continuously studying and excelling. Dr. Brodman received her undergraduate degree in histology and embryology from Cornell University in 1935. During her undergraduate days, she applied for admission to medical schools. However, she was not accepted. During one of the Medical Library Association's (MLA's) oral history interviews, the interviewer asked about her desire to attend medical school. She responded:

I applied to several places, including Cornell where my family came from. My father and brother were both Cornell Medical School graduates. I applied at the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia and a few other places, but they all unanimously turned me down, and I think they were very right because my background course work in the biomedical field was not as good as it should have been. I liked histology and embryology, but I didn't really do very well in biochemistry or in physics or in some of the other more esoteric zoological courses. [1]

When she was not accepted into medical school immediately after graduation, she entered Columbia University to study librarianship. In 1936, she received a bachelor's degree in library science. When asked by the MLA interviewer about the choice of library science, she responded:

### Highlights

- The contributions of Estelle Brodman, PhD, are highlighted using her own words published in journal articles and an oral history transcript.
- Continuing education of medical librarians was a passion for Dr. Brodman. She pushed the Medical Library Association at just the right time by expounding on its philosophy and importance to a profession.

### Implications

- In her own words, Dr. Brodman generates a palpable excitement about education for medical librarianship and about the future of medical librarianship that continues to resonate today.

When I didn't get into medical school I had to decide what else I wanted to do. Librarianship sounded interesting because I'd been interested in libraries before and I must admit, embarrassedly, that I had an argument with my mother, who wanted me to be a social worker and mess with other people's lives. I said I'd rather be a librarian. And that's how I got into library school. [1]

At Columbia, she demonstrated her interest in medical librarianship. For example, she indicated that during the special libraries course focusing on reference works, she used medical library examples. Dr. Brodman stayed in New York, after graduation and obtained a second degree in library science from Columbia, this time a master's in 1943. When asked why a second library science degree, she responded, "I was on the committee which changed the program so that it was more theoretical, and therefore I had to show why it was a good idea" [1].

Dr. Brodman also received a doctoral degree in the history of medicine from Columbia University in 1954, with a dissertation focused on the development of medical librarianship and medical bibliography. This dissertation was converted into a book and became MLA's first publication [2]. When asked why she selected history of medicine rather than an advanced degree in librarianship, she responded with a typical Dr. Brodman statement:

Well they didn't have a DLS or a PhD in librarianship at Columbia at that time. They were trying out a new program which was to unite a subject specialty with librarianship. It only lasted through me. There were four or five of us in that program, and I got the first PhD and then they abolished it. I never knew whether they abolished it because I was so terrible that they didn't think it was worth doing, or I was so good that they thought nobody would come up to my standards. [1]

Dr. Brodman's formal education was complete, but not her continued desire for further education. In 1959, she held a postdoctoral studies position at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a second postdoctoral studies position in 1960 at the University of New Mexico. Dr. Brodman characterized her professional life as falling into three phases:

In the first, I was learning—learning everything that needed to be learned, both about the technique of librarianship and about what libraries existed to be. Then the second part of my professional life consisted of putting some of this into effect, but perhaps on a broader scale, on a national scale. Then, finally, I got to the point where doing the things was more or less automatic and I could stand back and reflect about what I was doing and what libraries in general were doing. But certainly at the time, I had no idea that I was going through all these various stages. [1]

## EDUCATION OF MEDICAL LIBRARIANS

Dr. Brodman contributed substantially to understanding and improving education for medical librarians in four areas: (1) the history and philosophy of medical librarian education, (2) postgraduate education, (3) continuing education, and (4) as a role model for education. The following sections describe her contributions in each of these areas.

### History and philosophy of medical librarian education

To understand education of medical librarians, Dr. Brodman thoroughly researched educational patterns to illustrate the evolution of education for a profession. Discussing this evolution with regard to medical librarianship, she noted:

The first method evolved was apprenticeship. Prospective medical librarians were hired and learned on the job whatever their supervisors could teach them and whatever they could gain from the tools at hand. In addition, in some parts of the Western world, the voluntary organization of medical librarians became extremely important, particularly when the specialty of medical librarianship was just beginning to split off from the larger field of librarianship.

Apprenticeship combined with informal study ... is often the only way in which specialty librarians far from centers of literary teaching, placed in library positions without education or previous experience, can get the training they need. ... one need only go into a library where untrained librarians are spending their energies trying to solve problems which have already been solved elsewhere to be impressed by the human wastage found there. It is as if no one had ever invented writing or that human educability did not exist. [3].

Her research uncovered the different educational systems that emerged as the profession developed:

With the advent of formal education different kinds of training emerged: one based upon the old medieval guild system, one on the continental university system, and one on the school of technology approach to professional education seen in the United States. The guild system is characteristic of British and Commonwealth countries, the European university system is mirrored in German practice, and the Americans tend to use the technological school approach. [3]

Dr. Brodman's research showed the evolution of medical librarian education in the United States as technical training attached to universities. In the 1940s, library schools began to review their curricula and methods of teaching graduate education. Dr. Brodman said:

American library schools feel that they have a twofold purpose: to prepare their students to take on the complicated technical tasks which make up the day-to-day work of a great many practitioners, and to present to the students the theory and philosophy of librarianship, which puts the practice into its larger perspective, and without which the daily practice becomes only the blind following of badly understood rules and regulations. This double goal is as true for the specialized course in medical librarianship as it is for cataloging, reference work, or the newly introduced documentation and machine methods. How well the individual library schools carry out their tasks and how closely they achieve their goals varies enormously in the country, with some library schools universally regarded as excellent for presenting to their students the exciting aspects of their profession in such a fashion that they cannot help but catch fire, while others seem unable to rise above a purely pedestrian level.

At present, students training to be medical librarians attend a college or university for four years; then, after receiving a bachelor's degree in some subject field, the students are admitted to study at a graduate school of librarianship. Here they are given a composite curriculum: i.e., certain courses are "required" of all students, no matter what sub-specialty of librarianship they elect, while other classes are chosen by the student in relationship to the field of librarianship he wishes to enter.

The "required courses" are a kind of insurance that a student will be able to take any of a number of kinds of library jobs. This is especially important in a situation ... where students in library schools may have no previous library training and no idea into what kind of job or in what type of library they will work after completion of their formal education. The "elective" courses... give the students insight into the problems of specific library situations, and are thought to be particularly valuable for individuals with specially oriented backgrounds or for practicing librarians returning to specific posts in certain types of libraries. [3]

### Postgraduate education

Her research about the education of medical librarians led Dr. Brodman to focus on the need for postgraduate education to further enhance the training and education of medical librarians. The concept of post-

academic degree education programs became popular in the 1960s. Dr. Brodman suggested that there are several goals for postgraduate programs: (1) to put theoretical knowledge to the test of actual practice, (2) to view the parts of medical librarianship in perspective for the whole of the library and for the whole of society, and (3) to “get the habit of comfortably asking hard questions and setting about answering them” [4].

In the following passage, she articulately expressed her opinion of post-degree programs and the type of education that needs to occur as well as some of the problems that she witnessed:

It is important that we once again compare and contrast the postgraduate academic training for medical librarians with the less formal, nonacademic traineeships now available. In our time these two methods of obtaining further training are so widespread that many students are very likely to have to make a decision for or against one or the other, and they ought to be clear about which they are choosing.

Postgraduate training has become so necessary, so ingrained in our educational structure that postgraduate fellowships have become numerous; their attainment is now a sought-for, even an expected, event in the young scientist's career.

In addition to a well-thought-out plan, interested leaders, and good teachers who work at it, I think traineeships should be expected to give the student a well-rounded view of the particular segment of medical librarianship being presented. He should have contacts with, experience in, and time to study and reflect on as many elements of what makes up medical librarianship (or computer librarianship, or whatever we wish to specialize in) as is possible in one year. Necessarily, some of this will have to be somewhat superficial, but it should not be so superficial that it adds an air of unreality to what is being done or continues the purely theoretical treatment he got in school. He should actually get his feet wet and his hands dirty in doing some of the menial, day-to-day tasks—like preparing code sheets for input to a computer—to give him some real-life knowledge of the problems of accuracy, fatigue, visual difficulties, deadlines, and so forth. Such learning experiences are not demeaning and will pay off in the long run in greater understanding of the processes of going from a theoretical plan to an accomplished fact.

I believe that a student in a postgraduate program should be expected to put his theoretical knowledge to the test of actual practice, thereby uncovering “what they don't teach us in library school”; he should be asked to view the parts of medical librarianship in perspective for the whole of the library and for the whole of society; and to get the habit of comfortably asking hard questions and setting about answering them—the comfort coming from the frequency with which he had done them.

And, finally, I would hope that the student would learn the fun of medical librarianship; the realization that while it is deadly serious, it does not have to be deadly—that the art of being a medical librarian and the art of being a human being have much in common. And that I think, he cannot ever learn in the rarified and objective atmosphere of an academic institution alone. Here, theory must give way to real life, if a viable medical librarianship is to evolve. [4]

## Continuing education

In addition to supporting the underlying educational system for medical librarianship and postgraduate education, Dr. Brodman also concentrated on continuing education for all medical librarians. MLA had been at the forefront of library associations that provided continuing education for their members. Starting in 1949, MLA offered scholarships “to worthy individuals to allow them to leave their regular jobs in a library and return to school for short courses in medical librarianship” [5]. In 1957, MLA began a series of refresher workshops in conjunction with its annual meeting and experimented with several different types of refresher courses. The association's Seminar Committee in 1962 stated that “an evaluation of the experience gathered with these various approaches is necessary” and recommended the appointment of a Committee on Continuing Education “to study, plan, and arrange programs for continuing education of medical librarians and ancillary personnel, and to make recommendations to the Board from time to time as to other means by which continuing education of medical librarians can be served” [6].

During her time as MLA president (1964–1965), Dr. Brodman focused considerable attention on continuing education. She appointed the recommended Committee on Continuing Education and named herself as chair. Other members included Harold Bloomquist, Margaret Kinney, Erich Meyerhoff, and Betty Withrow [6]. Dr. Brodman stated that

The mark of a learned society is that its members continue their studies during their entire careers. They do this partly to reinforce and deepen knowledge of their field which they already hold; this may be considered in the nature of a refresher, a review of half-forgotten ideas or skills. ...Unless this studying is done, the cultural lag between what is known to be possible and what is used in a particular society becomes very great. [6]

The Committee on Continuing Education stated that ongoing professional education was a very important responsibility of MLA and recommended continued emphasis on this area. The MLA continuing education effort has been exceptional, and its expansion started with Dr. Brodman and expanded with the report of the Committee on Continuing Education. In addressing the issue of continuing education for medical librarians, Dr. Brodman stated:

I have been struck recently by the number of articles which have been appearing in the library literature on the topic (or at least with the title), “A Philosophy of This or That Aspect of Librarianship,” and it has set me to wondering why at this time in our history we should feel the need to define explicitly the basis for the things we do, and to define them, moreover, in terms of fundamental assumptions and beliefs. Philosophy, you remember, can be characterized as “the science which investigates the facts and principles of reality and human nature and conduct.” Why, I asked myself, are we searching so hard for reality and the principles underlying it? I am not so naive as to believe that there is only one cause for so complex a phenomenon as this, but I



should like to describe one of the many causes which I think may be operating to bring about this search for reality...

Continuing education, however, is one key to changing this situation. Sometimes continued study leads to solutions of problems facing the community, but even when that does not happen, it can lead to the development of new meanings for the work done, and new interfaces and interrelations with the various segments of society for which it exists. The imaginative organization of knowledge is a never-ending goal, for it changes with changes in knowledge and organizational patterns of society, and with the kind of imagination each worker brings to it. "The same yesterday, today, and forever," may be true of revealed religion, but not, thank goodness, of librarianship in our world.

Reality is, indeed, a kaleidoscope which alters at any moment as we alter either the position of our own head or of the kaleidoscope itself. So far as society is concerned, also, a profession which is studying and probing everywhere is one that is likely to appeal to the best and most flexible minds; in doing so, it will raise its own standing as well as give it hope for the possibility of solving its own problems, without seeing other groups take over its responsibilities and privileges of change.

The setting of standards, the provision of courses of study, and the scholarship aid are all rightfully taken as the domain of the professional association. In this respect, the more I view what other library associations have done, the more impressed I am by the work of the Medical Library Association, which has outstripped its colleagues greatly. But we have just started, and the worry with which I am struck every now and then is that the Association may not be able to meet the educational needs of its members and of society as flexibly and imaginatively now as it has in the past, and as the present and future situations require. And the large influx of governmental money may freeze rather than liberate the present. For we live in a world where change has been accelerating markedly.

Just think how revolutionary have been the results of our increased ease of copying. The changes this one development have wrought in our fundamental approach to copyright, to interlibrary loans, to the ancient dichotomy of lending material while at the same time we make it available to the next reader, to our purchases of duplicate sets, and to our provision of shelving in new buildings are revolutionary in character, affecting our everyday decisions as librarians.

The deleterious effects of modern life on paper and binding have posed still another set of problems. The computer is only one obvious element of rapid change. New methods of teaching in the medical and allied sciences raise fundamental questions about the ultimate place of books as teaching devices. Are we being educated so that we can handle such violent changes? Is the Medical Library Association struggling as it should with the problems of educating for change? Is medical librarianship becoming a mobile innovative stream which, like Heraclitus', is never twice the same? We can only hope that the times will indeed bring forth the solutions. [5]

The greatness and spirit of Dr. Brodman are further illustrated in the following passage summarizing some of her key beliefs regarding professional development in librarianship:

But continuing education is not only a matter of courses, attendance at meetings, seminars, committees, and staff discussions. The careful reading of the published literature, the thoughtful discussion with colleagues of problems

(complete with a cup of coffee or a martini), the listening to those who represent another discipline—and then the slow and halting approach to its assimilation and to insight into its meaning are all very valuable .... the viewing of a beautiful painting, the listening to a moving piece of music, the quiet contemplation of the countryside on a drowsy summer afternoon are the sherbets, which clear the palate between the courses in a formal banquet. And what a wonderful banquet and what wonderful courses are open to those who would eat at the table of continuing education! [5]

With these words, Dr. Brodman clearly challenged all medical librarians to continue learning while she eloquently pushed MLA to continue to improve its philosophy of continuing education.

### Role model for education

While she spent considerable time educating future librarians in classrooms, through postgraduate work, and through continuing education, she also educated daily as a role model through her behavior and her writings. Dr. Brodman was a medical librarian throughout her career with organizational positions ranging from assistant librarian at Cornell University School of Nursing Library (1936 and 1937), assistant medical librarian at Columbia University (1949–1951), member of the library faculty of Columbia University (1946–1951), assistant librarian for reference service at the National Library of Medicine (1949–1961), and librarian and associate professor of medical history at Washington University Medical School in St. Louis, Missouri (1961–until retirement). She was also on the faculty of other US library schools (Catholic University and the University of Missouri) and international universities (Keio University, Tokyo, Japan).

In 1961, she decided that she "would be happiest [at Washington University in St. Louis] because the dean understood what a library was trying to do...I wanted to teach... [and] I was able to persuade them that just as any other department [the library] should do research and training... [and they gave me] money to do research and development and a separate staff and some space" [1].

While at Washington University, Dr. Brodman was able to develop the Periodicals Holdings in Schools of Medicine (PHILSOM) project, pioneering work in the field of library automation [7,8]. She stated, "I think it was just in the air... at that period everybody was euphoric [about automation]." She also started a specialized internship in computer aspects of librarianship that "brought the idea of automation to a larger group...as [the interns] went out from here" [1].

In 1981, she predicted that "every laboratory [will have] its own computer [and] make it unnecessary...to come to the library." She said she "would like to see [libraries] better able to understand the problems of the people who" use them [1].

Sometimes Dr. Brodman's writing was in the "just the facts" mode, but her day-to-day beliefs were expressed in meetings and elsewhere. Her oral history interviews showed her passion and purpose. For

example, during the MLA oral history interview, Nancy W. Zinn, FMLA, made the following statement:

You have emphasized the importance of subject background languages and research skills. In your Janet Doe lecture in 1971, you spoke of the pursuit of excellence. Your keynote speech at the SLA Annual Meeting in Denver in 1963 had noted that rapid changes in librarianship bring fear of the unknown through a lack of understanding and emphasized the joy of knowledge and the intellectual excitement of learning. Even earlier you wrote that, "the most important way in which the medical librarian can continue to grow ... is by working on some problem connected to her work, no matter how small, and publishing her conclusion." All of this characterizes your own career. Do you see any indications today that librarians see these as worthwhile goals? [1].

Dr. Brodman's feistiness and strong beliefs are demonstrated in her response.

Well, how can I talk about all medical librarianship? I get very disturbed because many medical librarians I see don't feel that they need to continue their education, they're not interested in education!

I don't know. I come from a culture which is different from the culture around now. I come from a culture of Talmudic scholars who have always thought that the greatest pleasure in life is the study of intellectual questions and the examination of logical alternatives. I find learning a great joy and a great pleasure, and I don't understand people who don't enjoy learning, who don't get pleasure out of something new and different and exciting which they had not thought of before or who don't get any feeling of satisfaction out of following an argument to its logical conclusion or examining something from various points of view and trying to get a rounded picture of a phenomenon.

I therefore don't even know how to talk to these people. We talk on different fundamentals. They think of learning as something they are required to do, and I think of learning as something that I want to do. It's a very different point of view and so I get disturbed with my own staff because I can't get them to (most of them, not all) learn anything new to share their knowledge. They think a discussion is an argument and argument *ad hominem* rather than just an attempt to examine the problem. [1]

This passage represents Dr. Brodman's passion for education and her concern about those who did not share that passion. She "educated for correctness" at MLA meetings and in private conversations. Colleagues respected her for her contributions. Without her "pushing" at the point in time she did, the profession would likely not be what it is today.

When Dr. Brodman was assistant librarian for reference services at the National Library of Medicine, its internship program was evolving. In the following passage, she discussed the options for a new graduate and indicated that there were only two choices of what to do upon graduation: to take a job and grow through on-the-job learning or to apply for an internship [9]. She stated:

Any job in a good library will teach the willing learner many things. If the job requires working in various portions of the library, it may even give him (over a long period of time) a

well rounded view of the medical librarianship practiced in that institution. Because such learning is wholly dependent upon day-to-day demands, however, there may very well be long periods when certain aspects of the work are never encountered. Even more important is the series of explanations, theoretical backgrounds, and regular studies offered by the internship and absent from ordinary learning on the job. Like all formal education an internship provides the comparative anatomy and physiology of the art, a job the study of a single species. [9]

## SUMMARY

MLA honored Dr. Brodman's continued pursuit of excellence by creating the Estelle Brodman Award for the Academic Medical Librarian of the Year in 1986. With this award, MLA annually recognizes an academic medical librarian, who at mid-career demonstrates a significant achievement, the potential for leadership, and continuing excellence. This philosophy of continuing excellence sums up an educator extraordinaire—Estelle Brodman.

To professionals in medical libraries in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, Dr. Brodman was an inspiration as well as someone who could strike fear into unsuspecting librarians. She loved her profession and pushed it and professional practitioners further and faster than others, especially through education.

Her focus on education was among her continued contributions to medical librarianship. She focused on education through publishing, with more than 100 articles, book chapters, and books. She focused on creating quality graduate education. She focused on continuing education and especially the role of MLA as the vehicle to provide that education, while she pushed medical librarians to enhance their education. She focused on post-degree training programs and internships, all with eloquent comments embedded with practical, down-to-earth sayings.

The reader may consider Dr. Brodman's words and examine how they impact librarians today when the world has so vastly changed. Are librarians continuing their education and remaining excited about medical librarianship and the future?

The last paragraph of the transcript of her November 22, 1978, MLA oral history sums her feelings about medical librarianship:

Well, I would hate to stop this without saying how exciting and fulfilling intellectually I have found medical librarianship over the years. Like the theories of the Catholic Church, medical librarianship can be practiced at the lowest and least intellectual level or at the highest ability which one's *pia mater* allows one to have. Being able to work on problems which are intellectually fascinating and socially useful has been something which I would not have given up for anything. Although I went into medical librarianship by chance and almost by the back door, I'm very glad that I did and that I came in at a time when so many exciting things were happening.

Weekend before last, I went to the [Association of College and Research Libraries] meeting in Boston and then to the [American Society for Information Science] meeting in New

York, back-to-back, and the difference between the college and university librarian and the information scientist, particularly in the biomedical library, was so great and so obvious that I thanked my stars over and over again that I had not ended up as a public or university college librarian, but had gotten into this much more exciting field of biomedical librarians [1].

Dr. Brodman's words are characterized by a true passion for medical librarianship. In turn, medical librarianship is truly fortunate that Dr. Brodman's career led her to medical librarianship. Her efforts in education and as an educational role model helped transform the profession. Today's librarians owe much to Dr. Brodman's pioneering ideas and personal examples of lifelong learning.

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